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THE GREAT TRAIL THAT BECAME THE CHICAGO ROAD

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The first land communication lines in Michigan were Indian trails. The Indian trails formed a great network over the state, some being just paths between villages or leading from one canoe route to the next. Some were great overland routes originating at the eastern seacoast or at the Gulf of Mexico, and well nigh traversing the continent. Many of these great trails became roads for the white men. There were no wagon roads in Michigan until about 100 years after the French founded Detroit and Michigan had been known for 150 years.

The greatest of the Indian trails affecting our territory was the Great Sauk Trail, known in different parts of the long route it traversed by different names. LaSalle and his Voyageurs were the first white men to see the great trail and travel over it. Another immortal who used this trail was Chief Tecumseh when he set out to form the Indian tribes into a great confederacy.

The English settlers in the new world were acquainted with the Great Sauk Trail in stages, so that when they spoke or wrote about it they scarcely ever took note of its transcontinental scope, but spoke in terms of those portions of the trail with which they had become acquainted as they advanced across the continent. The eastern end of the Great Trail was known to the New England settlers as Nemacolin's Path, and later as Braddock's Road. This trail led from the Atlantic seaboard to Fort Pitt, now the site of Pittsburgh. This is the road on which Braddock was so sadly defeated.

The next portion of the Trail with which the white settlers became acquainted was known to them as the Great Trail, and also as the Iroquois Trail. It led from Fort Pitt westerly south of Lake Erie, swung around the end of the lake, crossed the Maumee River near where Toledo now stands, and came up to Fort Detroit; it crossed a great swamp between the Maumee River and Detroit which was later in history to give the white settlers some heartbreaking moments.

Acknowledgement is made of assistance and material consulted in the Public Libraries of Coldwater, Dearborn, Niles, Sturgis, and Wayne.

The next westerly link in the Great Trail became known to the settlers as the Great Sauk Trail. It led from Fort Detroit southwestward across the peninsula of Michigan, swung around the south end of Lake Michigan, and came up the Chicago River to where Chicago was founded. Another link led westerly from that point and went across the Mississippi River and led into the western plains country. At that point the trail divided, one fork leading southwesterly into Mexico and the other fork continuing westerly to the Rocky Mountains.

That part of the Great Trail with which we are dealing in this paper is the Great Sauk Trail from Detroit to Chicago. To the Indians the old trail really represented their idea of a superhighway. It was wide anough in most places for two warriors to march side by side, if any should want to do so. It was dry and smooth during those times of the year when warriors would need to travel on it, and it was so old and well traveled that there were no large trees in the way, and the path was so well beaten that even brush couldn't grow in it. In many places when the white man came the Indians acquired ponies and when they moved from village to village they tied a "travois" to the pony and dragged a load of household stuff on the travois. That made the trail double, that is, it wore a double trench in which the poles of the travois trailed. That practice made quite a road but the ruts were much too narrow for a wagon.* It did tend to clear the path so that with a little more clearing at the sides a wagon and team could pass. This was the condition when the United States came into possession of the Northwest Territory. The travois-widened trail was not continuous, for it only connected friendly villages, and where there were unfriendly neighbors there existed only a foot path.

One feature of the trail was the fact that it did not run through dense forest. See Map , showing in a general way the main forest and prairie features of southern Michigan at that time. A great dense forest covered southern Michigan, its northern border running roughly parallel to and a bit south of the line of the Great Sauk Trail. The northern boundary of this heavy forest crossed the Indiana line in Cass County and continued southwesterly. North of this forested area there existed many little prairies, that is, unforested areas. Interspersed between these prairies were stretches of oak openings or open oak forest, with occasional pieces of heavily timbered land. Through this area ran the Great Trail. It zigzagged from one prairie to the next, running from Detroit in a straight line to the site of Ypsilanti, where it crossed the Huron River; from there it ran roughly southwesterly across the state, around the south end of Lake Michigan through what is now Indiana, and thence to the Chicago River.

The Indians liked to establish their villages on the edges of the prairies, as that gave them the shelter of the forest and at the same time some open ground on which to cultivate their corn and squash.

The first white men to see and use the Great Sauk Trail were French explorers, traders, and trappers. They established trading posts at various vantage points along the trail, notably at Detroit, Ypsilanti, St. Joseph, and Monroe. That these were just trading

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The next westerly link in the Great Trail became known to the settlers as the Grand Sauk Trail. It led from Fort Detroit northwestward across the peninsula of Michigan, swing around the end of Lake Michigan, and come up the Chicago River to where Chicago was founded. Another link led northwesterly from Fort Detroit across the Mississippi River and led into the western prairie country, at that point the trail divided, one fork leading southwestward into Mexico and the other fork continuing westerly to the Rocky Mountains.

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posts and nothing more is well attested by the fact that they made no attempt to improve the old Indian trail or to adapt it to European type vehicles. They were prefectly content to use the canoe for transportation and to follow the trail afoot, just as the Indians had always done. They made no attempt to establish taverns along the route. Each party of "Voyageurs" cooked meals by campfire, marched single file on the trail, and slept beside the trail at night. This was true also of the first English-speaking travelers over the route. They were largely explorers, hunters and trappers searching for ever more fruitful hunting and trapping areas. The few earnest souls who came looking for new lands to settle or new sites for villages had to accomodate themselves to these conditions.

Not until after the War of 1812 did it become imperative to have a strategic highway over which troops and equipment could move swiftly from Detroit to any point threatened by an enemy, whether Indian or British, French or Spanish. This is one of the basic requirements of America. The enormous distances between points like Detroit and St. Joseph, or Detroit and Chicago, made it virtually impossible to maintain a standing army big enough to continuously guard our frontiers. Consequently our generals, beginning with Washington, have maintained our defenses by means of a mobile defence force and a system of strategic highways and waterways over which they could quickly dispatch troops to meet a threatened invasion or Indian rebellion.

The War of 1812 brought home to our American military strategists the absolute necessity of a good road from Fort Lawrence, which is now Toledo, to Detroit. As this was to be a military road, it appears to have been the idea of the general staff that the troops stationed at Fort Lawrence and Detroit could build this road in their spare time. Orders from the War Department to the local commandant for building this road were issued in 1816, but as the soldiers only worked intermittently and drew subsistence pay of 15 cents per day, one can imagine how enthusiastically the road building was undertaken.

The roads built by the Army were largely corduroy roads. That is, timber growing near the trail was cut down and made into lengths of about 12 feet; these logs were then laid across the road side by side, with large and small ends alternating so as to form a continuous roadbed of poles and logs. Then a layer of earth was dumped over the poles to a depth of from 6 inches to a foot or more. A sad feature of the so-called corduroy road was that it was always laid over ground that often became saturated with water, when the logs tended to float as the water rose while the earth sifted down between the logs. So without diligent maintenance the road soon became a causeway of bare logs, and some of the weaker logs would break up, leaving great holes in the road. To travel such a road in a wagon or cart without springs was really a jolting experience, not to be undertaken by those wearing dentures!

By 1822 the citizens of Monroe complained that it was almost impassable for wagons even in good weather, on account of logs, stumps, and deep holes, and in the fall and spring was even impassable for a man on horseback. In 1823 Congress authorized the building of a road through the black swamp, and the following year voted $20,000 for a continuation of the road from the Maumee Rapids to Detroit. This seems to be the first actual appropriation of money for a road in Michigan. As the settlements spread northward, the Great Trail became of utmost importance as a line of defense. It became the communications line between the fort at Detroit and the fort at Chicago. The Army began to use it and to make it serviceable for their purposes.

The influence of Father Gabriel Richard in the final decision of the Government to build the Chicago road is part of the historical record. Some work had been done to make the Indian trail passable for vehicles, but no serious effort had really been expended. Then, in 1823, Father Richard was appointed a delegate to Congress from the Territory of Michigan.*

The early surveyors' stories of an all-water Michigan still persisted. However, it seemed reasonable to believe that from Father Richard's close contact with the French around Detroit, he was better acquainted than most of his colleagues with the true facts regarding the interior of Michigan, especially with the entire feasibility of making the Great Trail into a good road across the state. He must have made a persuasive speech to Congress, for he succeeded in moving that body to actually appropriate money and appoint three commissioners to conduct a survey of this road and make a report on the practicability of the route as well as its probable costs. In 1824, Congress, on a motion by Father Gabriel Richard, voted $3000 for this survey. James McCloskey, Jonah Baldwin, and Laurent Durocher were named as commissioners to conduct the survey. They hired Orange Risdon to do the surveying. It is to be noted that Risdon had a rather distinguished member of his survey party, Captain Josiah Allen, who later settled on Allen's Prairie.

On November 2, 1825, Commissioner James McCloskey forwarded his survey notes to the Secretary of War with a letter of transmittal in which he stated: "The route taken was an old Indian trail (so-called) which, for aught that is known, has been traveled for centuries, and it is believed from personal observation of the Commissioners aided by information of travellers, that a variation of any considerable

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distance from this trail would, for the purposes of a good road, be impracticable." The route thus chosen through Ypsilanti, Jonesville, and White Pigeon is practically the same as that now followed by US 112.

Although the Government now had authorized a survey and had received a report on the road, it was slow to appropriate funds for construction. The Army improved the road as far as Ypsilanti, so that by 1823 wagons could get through. In that year it took three days to go from Detroit to Ypsilanti by team and wagon. The stage companies then improved the road enough to get coaches through.

The Michigan Centennial History lists the initial appropriations as follows: "The first appropriation for construction was voted in the Act of March 2, 1829, an amount of $8,000 to open the road to the Indiana boundary. The next appropriation was made in the Act of March 2, 1831, $10,000; in the Act of July 3, 1832, $15,000. Also on July 4, for building a road from La Plaisance Bay (Monroe) through Tecumseh to join the Chicago Trail, $15,000. The Historic Walker Tavern stands at the junction of these roads. The Act of May 2, 1833, provided for the Chicago Road, $8,000, and for the La Plaisance Bay Road, $15,000. Governor Cass reported on November 23, 1833, that the Chicago Road was completed to the 132nd mile. The complete road was to be 243 miles long.

"The final report of the Army Engineers for 1837 states that the road from Detroit to Ypsilanti was worn out and that horses and wagons bogged deep in the mire. He estimated that it would cost $15,000 to put this portion of the road back in good condition. From Ypsilanti west to the Indiana line the road was in good condition, also the branch from Sheldon's to St. Joseph was reported to be in good condition."

I have cited the lagging appropriations made by Congress for the improvement of the Chicago Road for the definite purpose of calling your attention to the fact that American enterprise did not wait for the Government to build the road. It was sufficient to know that it would eventually be built. Settlers began to flow over the old trail. The years between 1822 and 1835 write an epic in Michigan history that shines resplendent with the glory and heroism of our early pioneers.

Little towns sprang up rapidly now along the Great Trail. These can be noted, from Detroit westward:
The first white settler at Dearborn was James Cissne, in 1795.
The village at Wayne was founded in 1824 and was called Derby's Corners. The first log cabin built in Wayne Village was the scene of a famous murder trial. Stephen A. Simmons holds the doubtful distinction of being the first, last, and only man to have been hanged in Michigan under Michigan law.
Woodruff's Grove at Ypsilanti was started in 1823.

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Woodward's Grove at Ypsilanti was started in 1827.

Captain Allen induced Beniah Jones and his wife Lois to lay out a village plat. Jones selected the spot where the Chicago Road crossed the St. Joseph River and founded Jonesville in 1829.
Joseph Godfrey had a trading post at Coldwater in 1822, and that village was founded in 1831.
Sturgis was founded in 1828 by Judge John Sturgis
White Pigeon was founded in 1827.
The site of Mottville was selected for a mill site in 1827 by a settler from Crawford, Ohio, and the next year a general store was started. The stock was codfish, a keg of tobacco, and five barrels of whiskey.
Niles was founded in 1829, and about a mile west of it the Carey Indian Mission, consisting of 50 white people, was already in existence, founded in 1822. Isaac McCoy, a Baptist missionary, had been appointed by Governor Cass to head this Mission.
There was already a trading post at St. Joseph, founded by William Burnett, in 1785.

A descriptive passage quoted freely from Reynolds' History of Hillsdale County (1903) gives a vivid word picture of what pioneer life meant to those young people:

"Immediately after the opening of the Chicago Road, Jonesville presented the appearance of a pioneer camp. All around the little log house of entertainment where Beniah and Lois Jones made so comforting a welcome as to cause the many weary travelers to forget the discomforts they had experienced in the tangled undergrowth and deep mires of the Cotton and Black Swamps which their wearisome journeyings had compelled them to cross, white-topped wagons were thickly packed together, and men, women and children engaged in earnest conversation."

It was not unusual for a traveler over the road at that time to see a pioneer family come into camp, the man driving his team of horses or oxen hitched to a white-topped wagon, loaded with household goods, behind the boys of the family driving some sheep and a couple of cows, the wife and perhaps daughters bringing up the rear. Most of the mothers were young mothers. The Centennial History of Michigan emphasizes the youthfulness of our early pioneers. Few pioneer mothers lived to be over 40. We eagerly - and properly - erect memorials to honor the soldier who willingly sacrifices his life in battle, but there are few memorials to the pioneer mothers who spent their life's blood that their children might inherit the earth.

Business enterprise was not slow in those days either. By 1830 two stages were running from Detroit to the southwest over the Chicago Road. Recalling that the first actual appropriation of funds for the road by Congress was in 1829, it is plain that private enterprise made the trail passable and kept it so long before the government got around to doing so.

Another factor at work to make the Chicago Trail a great arterial highway was the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Steamboats had been in operation on the Great Lakes since 1818, so now the Chicago Trail became an extension of the Erie Canal, and immense movements of people and goods were concentrating upon Detroit.

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A descriptive passage quoted freely from Reynolds' History of Williams County (1907) gives a vivid word picture of what pioneer life meant to those young people:

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Some indication of the huge volume of traffic carried by the road at that time is given by Amos A. Parker, who made a tour over this route in 1834. He records that 80,000 western immigrants embarked from the port of Buffalo alone that season. People on foot, on horseback, some in private carriages, and many, many immigrant wagons, cattle and horses moved this way. By 1830 two stage coaches ran on regular schedule out of Detroit to the west as far as Niles.

There was one sad interlude in the road's history: the Black Hawk War in 1832 brought an almost complete cessation of travel over this road. Chief Black Hawk passed over the road on his way back from Malden, where he and his warriors had received presents. The settlers therefore concluded that he would retreat over the same route into Canada, and also might be joined by the Pottawattomies of southern Michigan. The troops who went to fight Black Hawk marched west over the Chicago Road. The Michigan Militia was mustered in at Niles, and thereafter the people of the area watched every movement of the troops, feeling that they could get information on the Indian advance by watching which way the troops went. All along the road was a state of nervous tension. To add to the panic, the cholera epidemic struck the people of Detroit and spread through the settlements; barricades were built across the roads and no one was allowed to enter or leave many of the towns of southern Michigan.

Carl E. Pray writes, in The Chicago Road, "Ypsilanti was so determined to keep out all dangers that even the boy Governor, Stephens T. Mason, journeying westward from Detroit, found it advisable not to venture within the town's authority. He hired a guide at the last tavern east of town and made a circuit around to the west. On reaching the road again it occurred to him that if he went on from there it might be a long time between drinks. The last oasis had been the tavern three miles east, there was no other tavern for several miles west. It seemed to him that there might not be serious objection to a traveler coming from the west, and so he ventured into town. He was promptly arrested and in spite of his governorship it was not until the sheriff was called that he was released."

Happily the scare ended a year later. The strategic value of the Chicago Road was definitely proved. Black Hawk was defeated before he got back as far as Chicago, and the cholera epidemic ended after it had nearly depopulated Detroit. It is said that half the troops stationed at Detroit perished that year. Father Gabriel Richard sacrificed his life in service to the people of Detroit in that plague. Now traffic was resumed in heavier volume than ever. By 1833 one coach left Ypsilanti for Niles every afternoon. Taverns sprang up all along the road, some of which became famous, notably the Walker Tavern, still at Cambridge Junction, and the Clinton Tavern, which Henry Ford purchased and moved to Greenfield Village.

During those stirring days when every tavern was taxed to capacity, robbers operated along the trail and provided an unhappy addition to the discomforts and hazards of travel. The story is told of a couple who had been warned not to stay in a certain area if they could avoid it, as robbers were known to be operating thereabouts. Unfortunately, nightfall found them in that very district and they

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took lodgings in a small tavern. About midnight the man awakened his wife and said, "Get up and dress as quickly as you can - there has been a lot of commotion downstairs and I'm sure there are robbers in the house. Here is my case knife, defend yourself the best you can. I have my cane sword, we'll just do our best." They stood tense guard until morning only to find the commotion had been caused by the death of the grandfather of the house and the subsequent coming and going of neighbors.

The early settlers had no bridges. The first bridge at Ypsilanti was started in 1836. The Chemin River which empties into Lake Michigan at the site of Michigan City, Indiana, was unfordable, but the river current acting against lake currents had built up a great sand bar out in the lake. This sand bar was just below water level, and it was possible to detour around the mouth of the river by having someone who knew the sand bar well drive the vehicles out along the bar and around to dry land again. Early travelers record this as one of their most nerve-racking experiences.

The thing that plagued the settlers most of all was the slowness of travel. The invention of the automobile certainly had its first urge in those strenuous days when people were striving to cover the great distances between cities in horse-drawn vehicles.

Many famous people traveled over this road, among them Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Harriet Martineau, from England, wrote a graphic description of her trip over this road in 1836: Of the strip between Detroit and Ypsilanti: "Juggernaut's car would have been broken to bits on such a road." Beyond Jonesville, in Hillsdale County: "It was more deplorable than ever. Such hopping and jumping, such slipping and sliding, such looks of despair from the middle of a pond, such shifting of logs and carrying of planks, and handing along the fallen trunks of trees!" She says that when the stagecoach reached Ypsilanti, she picked up a newspaper published in the newly founded village of Ann Arbor, and comments that it was poorly made up but its contents were good. A year later Michigan was admitted to statehood, and thereafter the Government made no further appropriations for roads in Michigan.

It is a fact that the new state government lacked funds so that Michigan struggled with many fiscal problems and a thinly scattered population from which to collect taxes. Many state industries got their start about this time. The first shipment of fruit from St. Joseph was made in 1836. From White Pigeon, peppermint and beet sugar were shipped out in 1836. Several woolen mills were in operation. But all these enterprises were too young to pay any considerable taxes. The result was that the state found itself unable to build or maintain roads, opening the way for many private toll roads to come into being. Individual charters for these so-called "Plank Road Companies" were issued between 1837 and 1848. The charters permitted them to erect a toll gate every 10 miles. In 1848, a general plank road law obligated the companies to provide a good smooth permanent road, 16 feet in width, of which 8 feet were to be of plank 3 inches thick. An amendment in 1855 permitted gravel to be substituted for plank. Tolls collected were 2c per mile for 2-horse vehicles; one cent per mile for 1-horse vehicles. At this time the

road became known as the Chicago Turnpike, the term coming from European roads with turnstiles where guards were stationed arms with pikes or lances to collect the tolls.

I cannot tell how many miles of the Chicago Road were actually planked, because the Plank Road companies were not required to make reports, and I have as yet found no private papers, although I am confident such papers exist and could be found. We do know that in 1900 D. Farrand Henry made a report to Professor Mortimer E. Cooley recording 18 miles of plank road between Detroit and Saline. We have several old wood cuts which show a plank road in Saline Village itself. And the files in the office of Atwell-Hicks, Inc., Ann Arbor, contain an old map made by C. S. Woodard in 1860, locating a toll gate just east of Ypsilanti at the point where Holmes Road joins the Chicago Road.

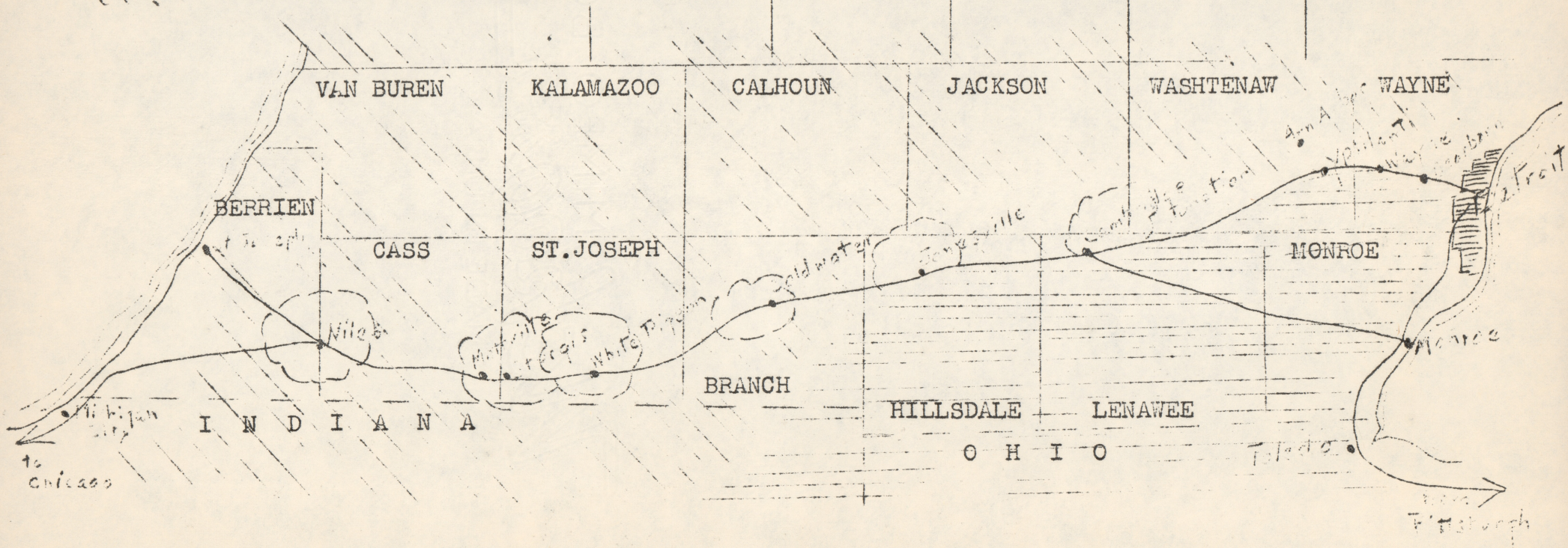
No sooner had the plank road companies taken over the main trunk lines than they began to meet stiff competition. The Erie and Kalamazoo Railroad, in the early 1830's, built a strap-iron railroad from Toledo to Adrian, over which cars were hauled by horses; and in 1836 began operating a steam locomotive over the route. By 1838 trains were running between Detroit and Ypsilanti; as far as Jackson in 1843; and all the way to St. Joseph by 1849. The stagecoach companies still operated but not so profitably, for who would pay toll every 10 miles on the way to Chicago when he could take a train at Detroit and ride in a fair degree of comfort to St. Joseph, and there take a steamer across to Chicago?

The plank roads, and in fact all toll roads, began to lose revenue, although some persisted until 1900, including the Detroit-Saline Plank Road. Other sections of the Chicago Road fell into a deplorable state of maintenance. Professor Roger L. Morrison writes "It was not until about 1883 that interest in a good road revived in this state, at about the time many cyclists began to enthuse over the hope of better roads." At that early date those cyclists who tried to talk people into spending money for good roads were, as Professor Morrison remarks, "as popular as an abolitionist in the ante-bellum South." No one cared about better roads. After the invention of the "safety bicycle," however, the number of interested people increased greatly.

The really big factor in reviving interest in good roads was, of course, the motor car. After 1900 the motorists began fighting for good roads, and the great Henry Ford fed ammunition to the battle with a motor car within reach of practically every family. A State Highway Department was set up on June 1, 1905, and Michigan once more began to pioneer in road building. Under Governor Groesbeck the Chicago Road was paved, between 1920 and 1925, and today it is again carrying an immense volume ot traffic just as it did in the days of the pioneers. The motor car is the answer to the pioneers' eager search for some means to conquer distance and take his family along on the journey; and therefore our highways are destined to play an ever larger role in our developing civilization.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
May 3, 1955

The course of present US 112 across southern Michigan, from Detroit to Chicago, practically coinciding with The Great Sauk Trail and Chicago Turnpike, with a few strategic intersecting trails, now highways also.

- Heavy Forest

- Light Forest and "Burr-Oak Openings" interrupted by "Prairies"